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Ringlingville, USA: the Stupendous Story of Seven Siblings and Their Stunning Circus Success

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possible for more people to indulge in water cures either through travel or at home, but this still did not by any stretch of the imagination constitute the majority of the population. Finally, there is no mention of race and the part it played in the social history of these establishments or of their impact on the state. It seems likely that at the most elite of the spas the liveried servants were black and the patrons white, adding perhaps to the aura of gentility that many of these establishments sought to cultivate. Yet on this subject the work is silent.

Overall, *Healing Waters* provides an interesting start for exploring the meaning of Missouri's natural mineral water resources. Its greatest contributions are its survey of all the extant sites and its attention to both the geology of the region and the history of those who studied that geology. Its social history of water spas and water cures, however, is superficial and offers little to serious students of the subject.

Ringlingville, USA: The Stupendous Story of Seven Siblings and Their Stunning Circus Success, by Jerry Apps. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2004. xxii, 272 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer Chris Rasmussen is assistant professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University. He has published articles on county fairs, the Iowa State Fair, and Phil Stong in the *Annals of Iowa* and *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*.

In this detailed, lavishly illustrated history of America's most celebrated circus family, Jerry Apps recounts the story of the Ringlings and their hometown of Baraboo, Wisconsin, which was aptly dubbed "Ringlingville" in honor of its most notable residents. The Ringling brothers, who spent most of their childhoods in McGregor, Iowa, and produced their early circuses there, began with a small variety show in 1882 and launched their circus two years later. It quickly grew to become America's largest circus. The Ringlings purchased several of their competitors, including, in 1907, their largest and most famous rival, the Barnum and Bailey Circus. The Ringling Brothers Circus wintered in Baraboo from its inception until 1918 and contributed greatly to the town's growth and prosperity. When the Ringlings abruptly moved their winter quarters to Barnum and Bailey's facilities in Bridgeport, Connecticut, after the 1918 season, "Ringlingville" became a memory. Today, the Circus World Museum in Baraboo preserves the history of the American circus and furnished many of the abundant sources for Apps's richly documented narrative.

The book proceeds chronologically, tracing the Ringling brothers' determination not to follow in their father's footsteps by becoming

harness makers. From childhood, the brothers were dazzled by circuses and shows and aspired to create their own. Apps chronicles the growth of the Ringlings' enterprise from its modest beginnings in the 1880s into a big business with hundreds of employees. Seven Ringling brothers helped to manage the circus during its first four decades, and they amassed a considerable fortune. Apps furnishes numerous tallies of the rise of the Ringlings' business dealings, regaling the reader with attendance figures, gross receipts, expenses, loans, routes, programs, and myriad details of the circus's operation (June 17, 1891: \$54.60 for feed). He sometimes too readily accepts the words of the Ringlings and of Baraboo's boosters as the literal truth, rather than subjecting their claims to a bit of skepticism and analysis. Nonetheless, as a history of the growth of a single company and the men who built it, Apps's account is nearly encyclopedic, and it is useful to have so much information packed into one volume.

Ringlingville is illustrated with dozens of photos of the Ringlings, their circus, and its stunning posters. The circus posters attest to the Ringlings' flamboyant showmanship, and are festooned with arresting illustrations and hyperbole ("The Biggest of All Big Shows . . . Matchless in All that Makes it Mighty . . . The Greatest Show, All Told, Beneath the Sun"). Poring over these posters reveals the growth of a show business ethos characterized by sensationalism and hype. Apps would have done well to devote more attention to analyzing these eye-catching advertisements. The book also contains many text boxes about distinct aspects of the circus, such as elephants, the role of women, and the importance of advertising. These boxes provide fascinating sideshows to supplement the book's main attraction, its detailed examination of the Ringling brothers' management of the family business. Weaving more discussion of the circus's acts and audiences' response into the book's central narrative would have enhanced Apps's history of the growing size and prosperity of the Ringlings' company.

Because Apps focuses so tightly on chronology and on facts and figures, he devotes less attention to some important questions about the history of the circus, the growth of the show business, and the forces of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization that transformed America between the 1880s and World War I. As a cultural history of the circus, Apps's account mentions, but does not analyze, a number of tantalizing issues: Why were circuses controversial, and why did the Ringlings struggle so hard to ensure that their show provided strictly "clean" amusement? What was the relationship of the circus to other entertainments, such as fairs and carnivals, and later, to radio and movies? How did the Ringlings gauge what acts would

prove popular with audiences? To what extent did the Ringlings modernize their circus to appeal to audiences, or did audiences expect the circus to remain virtually unchanged year after year? Did circuses change in order to appeal to an increasingly urban America? What was the relationship between the Ringlings' no-nonsense business dealings and their intuitive sense of showmanship?

Apps may not hazard bold generalizations about the growth of commercial amusements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but he does offer a thoroughly detailed history of the Ringlings' circus that was central to the rise of the show business. His book will be of considerable interest and usefulness to readers interested in the history of the circus and the show business, as well as Wisconsin. Apps's account of the 34-year history of Ringlingville and the stupendous growth of the Ringling Brothers Circus chronicles an era in which both the Midwest and the show business were transformed.

Jazz on the River, by William Howland Kenney. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xii, 229 pp. Illustrations, tables, maps, appendixes, notes, index. \$27.50 cloth.

Reviewer John D. Baskerville is associate professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa. His research interests include African American social and political thought, music of the African diaspora, and African Americans in Iowa. His latest book is *The Impact of Black Nationalist Ideology on American Jazz Music of the 1960s and the 1970s* (2003).

In 1880 John Streckfus, the first son of German immigrant and legendary Rock Island entrepreneur Balthazar Streckfus, defied his father's wishes and left the family's wagon-building business to establish a packet boat business—transporting produce and a few passengers to small towns along the Mississippi River. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the packet boat business was losing ground to the faster and more affordable railroads. In an attempt to salvage his riverboat business and to stay close to his beloved river, Streckfus converted his packet boat business to an excursion boat business, carrying "sightseers and excursionists" on day trips up and down the river.

In 1911 Streckfus bought the struggling Diamond Jo Line and converted the weary fleet of packet boats to excursion steamers. He equipped each boat with a large, polished-maple dance floor and an orchestra that played "hot dance music" out of the city of New Orleans to entertain passengers. Streckfus's family-run riverboat company "soon dominated the excursion trade on the Mississippi River, which the Streckfus family would come to treat as their exclusive domain" (19).

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